



US Army Corps
of Engineers

GREAT LAKES AND OHIO RIVER DIVISION

LOUISVILLE DISTRICT / HUNTINGTON DISTRICT / PITTSBURGH DISTRICT

Ohio River Main Stem Systems Study (ORMSS)

Integrated Decision Document and Environmental Assessment:

Ohio River Ecosystem Restoration Program

Appendix I:

INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS



Restore
and
Protect
the Ohio
River
Ecosystem



FINAL

OCTOBER 2000

**Integrated Decision Document and
Environmental Assessment :**

Ohio River Ecosystem Restoration Program
ILLINOIS, INDIANA, KENTUCKY, OHIO, WEST VIRGINIA, PENNSYLVANIA

Appendix I:

INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS

October 2000

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APPENDIX I

I.1 LAWS APPLICABLE TO ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECTS

I.1.1 Corps of Engineers Ecosystem Restoration Authorities

Without a specific ecosystem restoration program for the Ohio River there would be some projects contributing to ecosystem restoration goals, but the approach would be piecemeal and very limited in scope. The following paragraphs describe some of the existing authorities and programs that are available at present and in the future.

Presently, several authorities are available to the Corps of Engineers and others that could be used to accomplish some of the ecosystem restoration goals for the Ohio River corridor. However, none of these, alone, or in combination, could fully accomplish the goals developed by the environmental partners. These authorities (discussed below) were designed, in many instances, for different purposes. Many of them are targeted to smaller scale resource issues than those of the Ohio River corridor. Further, the combination of individual projects undertaken through a variety of different authorities does not constitute a comprehensive approach for maintaining and improving an entire ecosystem. Neither do they offer the extensive partnership benefits of an Ohio River Ecosystem Restoration Program.

a). Section 1135 of WRDA 1986. This is the oldest of authorities specific to the Corps of Engineers for ecosystem restoration. Its purpose is to modify Corps projects or operations (including areas impacted by previous Corps projects) to benefit fish and wildlife habitat. Projects implemented under Section 1135 must be feasible, cost effective, and consistent with authorized project purposes. Cost sharing under the program is 75% Federal and 25% Non-federal for implementation and 100% Non-federal for operation and maintenance. Federal funds are limited to \$5 million per project, with the entire program authorized to be funded up to \$25 million annually.

b). Section 204 of WRDA 1992. Section 204 of WRDA 1992 was established to promote the beneficial use of dredged material. Nation-wide, the Corps of Engineers conducts a large-scale program of maintenance dredging to ensure the continued navigability of the waterway system. The resulting dredged material is frequently disposed in the most economical, yet environmentally acceptable manner. This authority provides a means and encourages use of the

dredged material to produce environmental benefits. The increased costs (i.e., additional costs over those of conventional disposal) associated with using the material for environmental benefits is cost shared with a non-federal partner at 75% Federal and 25% Non-federal for implementation, with 100% Non-federal operation and maintenance. There is no per project dollar limit, and the program is authorized for Federal funding at \$15 million annually.

c). Section 206 of WRDA 1996. Section 206 authority was established to encourage aquatic ecosystem restoration. Unlike Sections 1135 and 204, use of this authority does not require a connection to either a previous Corps project or dredging action. Section 206 projects are only applicable to aquatic ecosystem restoration. Cost sharing under the program is 65% Federal and 35% Non-federal for implementation and 100% Non-federal for operation and maintenance. Federal funds are limited to \$5 million per project, with the entire program authorized to be funded up to \$25 million annually.

d). Specifically Authorized Projects. Ecosystem restoration projects may also be undertaken through specific authorization by law. The process for such authorization is the same as for other large projects including flood damage reduction, navigation, etc. The Everglades Restoration Project in south Florida is an example of a specifically authorized ecosystem restoration project. Cost sharing is established by the authorization bill, generally at 65% Federal and 25% Non-federal for implementation and 100% Non-federal for operation and maintenance. Specific authorization is required for ecosystem restoration projects that exceed project authorized limits or do not meet the criteria for implementation under Sections 1135, 204, or 206.

I.1.2 Other Federal Authorities

Federal agencies other than the Corps of Engineers are also actively pursuing ecosystem restoration through program authorities specific to those agencies. Other Federal agencies involved in ecosystem restoration include the Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Tennessee Valley Authority.

Program authorities of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service include Partners for Wildlife, the Small Wetland Acquisition Program, and Refuge Management and are described below.

a). North American Bird Conservation Initiative The goal of the North American Bird Conservation Initiative is to facilitate the conservation of Native North American birds by increasing the effectiveness of existing and new initiatives, enhancing coordination, and fostering greater cooperation among the nations and peoples of the continent. Through this initiative, the first joint meeting between regional working groups of the shorebird plan, Partners in Flight, the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture, and the Colonial Waterbird Plan focused on cooperative approaches to bird conservation.

b). North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The North American Waterfowl

Management Plan provides a framework for waterfowl conservation and management efforts by describing population and habitat goals. The Plan's major premise is that the maintenance of abundant waterfowl populations is dependent on the protection, restoration and management of habitat. The Plan sets goals for waterfowl populations based on species numbers during the decade of the 1970's.

In concert with the Plan, 10 habitat joint ventures were established in the United States and 3 in Canada. Parts of the Ohio River are included within two joint venture areas: the Lower Mississippi River Valley Joint Venture and the Upper Mississippi River Joint Venture. Within the Upper Mississippi River Joint Venture, the New Madrid focus area includes portions of the Ohio River mainstem area in Illinois and Indiana. The Kentucky portion of the Ohio River is included in the Lower Mississippi River Valley Joint Venture. Habitat joint venture actions include protection, restoration, and enhancement of wetland and associated upland habitats. Protection strategies include habitat acquisition, conservation easements, leases, and management agreements with private landowners. Habitat enhancement activities include rest/rotational grazing practices, seasonal flooding of active croplands, and construction of nesting islands and structures for waterfowl and songbirds.

Presently, each state's waterfowl and waterfowl habitat objectives are undergoing review to develop site-specific focus area objectives. A draft of these site-specific objectives should be available in the near future.

c.) The Ohio River Valley Ecosystem (ORVE) Migratory Bird Resource Priority Metaproject was created in an effort to identify areas of importance to species of migratory birds. Target bird species include songbirds that winter in South America or Latin America and breed or inhabit the Ohio River Watershed during the spring and summer. These species are in particular danger due to stress caused by fragmentation and loss of habitat in both their wintering grounds and their spring and summer ranges.

The project will identify areas in the Ohio River watershed that are of particular importance to these species of birds (i.e., grasslands and forest) and present the information in GIS. Targeted bird species of concern within the ORVE include: Bewick's wren; cerulean warbler; golden-winged warbler; wood thrush; Louisiana waterthrush; worm-eating warbler; blackburnian warbler; Henslow's sparrow; eastern wood peewee; loggerhead shrike; hooded warbler; black and white warbler; dickcissel; yellow-billed cuckoo; yellow-throated vireo; field sparrow, whip-poor-will; Acadian flycatcher; black-billed cuckoo; black-throated blue warbler; chestnut-sided warbler; ovenbird; northern parula; Canada warbler; prairie warbler; gray catbird; Bachman's sparrow; summer tanager; great-crested flycatcher; short-eared owl; eastern phoebe; scarlet tanager; cedar waxwing; and northern (Baltimore) oriole.

d.) The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan is a collaborative effort between researchers, land

managers and education specialists from the U.S. who will cooperate with colleagues from Canada and Mexico to advance effective conservation of North American shorebird species. The Plan, coordinated by Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, will focus on three main components: 1) Habitat Management, 2) Research and Monitoring and 3) Education and Outreach. National working groups as well as smaller task groups and regional working groups have been established to address issues in each of these areas.

The Ohio River mainstem falls within two of the shorebird planning regions: Upper Mississippi/Great Lakes and Appalachian Mountains. The shorebird planning units are organized to correspond with the newly created Bird Conservation Regions.

e.) North American Colonial Waterbird Conservation Plan There is an initiative to develop a North American Colonial Waterbird Conservation Plan to advance the conservation of colonial-nesting waterbirds (seabirds, terns, wading birds, gulls) and their habitats in North America. It is a partnership of non-governmental agencies, researchers, private individuals, academics, and federal and state governmental agencies that will develop the Plan over the next two years. The goal is to develop a plan whose implementation will result in sustainable populations, distributions, and habitats of colonial-nesting waterbirds throughout North America, including breeding, migratory, and wintering ranges. The Plan is being developed in concert with other bird conservation planning efforts underway; these efforts include the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Strategy, Important Bird Areas, and Shorebird Conservation Plan. A series of workshops will be held to gather information and to develop different portions of the Plan, including colonial waterbird research and information needs, monitoring needs, management needs, and outreach and information needs.

F). U.S. Environmental Protection Agency The Environmental Protection Agency participates in ecosystem restoration through programs including the Clean Water Action Plan and various types of grants. The Clean Water Action Plan was conceived to build upon the tremendous progress made in cleaning up the nation's waters under the Clean Water Act and is primarily aimed at non-point sources of water pollution. An example of EPA's granting authorities is the 319 program whereby funds are provided to the States. In the case of the 319 program, these funds are also used to remedy various non-point sources of water pollution. While these programs are effective in dealing with many non-point problems throughout the US, their primary goal is to improve water quality. Water quality improvement is certainly an important element of ecosystem restoration, but it only deals with a narrow part of the overall solution of existing problems.

g). U.S Department of Agriculture(USDA) The USDA has a number of programs that also provide valuable benefits to ecosystem health. Included among these programs Conservation Technical Assistance, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Soil Survey Programs, Wetland Reserve Program, Forestry Incentives Program, Stewardship Incentive Program, and the Conservation Reserve Program to name a few. Two of the programs regarding restoration are described below. A complete list of USDA programs are shown in Exhibit I-1 along with a brief description of each. For additional information go to web site

The Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program to restore and protect wetlands on private property. It is an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land. Congress authorized WRP under the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by the 1990 and 1996 Farm Bills. Landowners who choose to participate in WRP may sell a conservation easement or enter into a cost share restoration Agreement with USDA to restore and protect wetlands. A restoration cost share agreement, generally for a minimum of 10 years in duration, would be for reestablishing degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays 75% of the cost of the restoration activity. This does not place an easement on the property. The landowner provides the restoration site without reimbursement. A landowner continues to control access the land and may lease the land-for fishing and hunting and other undeveloped recreational activities.

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program(WHIP) provides financial incentives to develop habitat for fish and wildlife on private lands. Participants agree to implement a wildlife habitat development plan and USDA agrees to provide cost-share assistance for the initial implementation of wildlife habitat development practices. USDA and the program participants enter into the a cost share agreement for wildlife habitat development. This agreement generally lasts a minimum of 10 years from the date the contract is signed.

All of these programs are valuable contributors to ecosystem complexes. While the programs play an important role, they do not focus consideration on comprehensive ecosystem restoration program.

I.1.3 Non-Federal Programs Benefiting Ecosystem Restoration

A large number of non-federal agencies and organizations are actively involved in various pursuits that also produce ecosystem benefits. At the state level are departments of environmental management, fish and wildlife agencies, parks departments, forestry departments and others that conduct numerous programs that provide habitat for fish and wildlife, open space, wetlands, etc. Typically, however, their programs are focused on particular aspects of ecosystems according to agency missions and constituents, rather than on ecosystems as a whole. Also, large ecosystem complexes such as the Ohio River corridor are inter jurisdictional in nature, and actions by individual states or agencies may not always be complimentary to other actions.

a). Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation Commission

In 1948, the governors for the states

along the Ohio River established an interstate Ohio River Valley Water Sanitation (ORSANCO) to fight the water pollution problems in the Ohio River. As a result of this effort, a valley wide educational program was started, new state laws were passed, industrial committees set control standards for industrial wastes, and many new pollution control installations were made (ORSANCO 1998). ORSANCO is very interested in this study and has provided a letter indicating their support for the Ohio River Ecosystem Restoration Program. See Appendix C, Exhibit C-4

Many non-governmental organizations have programs affecting ecosystem health in one way or another. Some excellent examples of these organizations include the Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, Ducks Unlimited, National Wild Turkey Federation, Sport Fishing Institute and many others. Both individually and collectively, their programs produce important ecosystem benefits. However, often these groups focus their efforts on narrow components of the ecosystem complex according to their charter and/or membership interests. While the benefits provided by these organizations are substantial, several vital components of the overall ecosystem are ignored because there simply is no constituency for them.

USDA CONSERVATION PROGRAMS

While there are a variety of USDA programs available to assist people with their conservation needs, the following primarily financial assistance programs are the principal programs available. Locally Led Conservation groups are encouraged to contact the State Offices of the appropriate agency for more specific information about each program.

Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The purpose of the program is to assist land-users, communities, units of state and local government, and other Federal agencies in planning and implementing conservation systems. The purpose of the conservation systems are to reduce erosion, improve soil and water quality, improve and conserve wetlands, enhance fish and wildlife habitat, improve air quality, improve pasture and range condition, reduce upstream flooding, and improve woodlands. Objectives of the program are to:

- Assist individual landusers, communities, conservation districts, and other units of State and local government and Federal agencies to meet their goals for resource stewardship and assist individuals to comply with State and local requirements. NRCS assistance to individuals is provided through conservation districts in accordance with the memorandum of understanding signed by the Secretary of Agriculture, the governor of the state, and the conservation district. Assistance is provided to land users voluntarily applying conservation and to those who must comply with local or State laws and regulations.
- Assist agricultural producers to comply with the highly erodible land (HEL) and wetland (Swampbuster) provisions of the 1985 Food Security Act as amended by the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 (16 U.S.C. 3801 et. seq.) and the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 and wetlands requirements of Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. NRCS makes HEL and wetland determinations and helps land users develop and implement conservation plans to comply with the law.
- Provide technical assistance to participants in USDA cost-share and conservation incentive programs. (Assistance is funded on a reimbursable basis from the CCC.)
- Collect, analyze, interpret, display, and disseminate information about the condition and trends of the Nation's soil and other natural resources so that people can make good decisions about resource use and about public policies for resource conservation.
- Develop effective science-based technologies for natural resource assessment, management, and conservation.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html) page
(<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>).

Conservation Farm Option (CFO)

Contact: USDA, Farm Service Agency or Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Conservation Farm Option is a pilot program for producers of wheat, feed grains, cotton, and rice. The program's purposes include conservation of soil, water, and related resources, water quality protection and improvement, wetland restoration, protection and creation, wildlife habitat development and protection, or other similar conservation purposes. Eligibility is limited to owners and producers who have contract acreage enrolled in the Agricultural Market Transition Act program, i.e. production flexibility contracts. The CFO is a voluntary program. Participants are required to develop and implement a conservation farm plan. The plan becomes part of the CFO contract which covers a ten year period. CFO is not restricted as to what measures may be included in the conservation plan, so long as they provide environmental benefits. During the contract period the owner or producer (1.) receives annual payments for implementing the CFO contract and (2.) agrees to forgo payments under the Conservation Reserve Program, the Wetlands Reserve Program, and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program in exchange for one consolidated payment.

Conservation of Private Grazing Land Initiative (CPGL)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Conservation of Private Grazing Land initiative will ensure that technical, educational, and related assistance is provided to those who own private grazing lands. It is not a cost share program. This technical assistance will offer opportunities for: better grazing land management; protecting soil from erosive wind and water; using more energy-efficient ways to produce food and fiber; conserving water; providing habitat for wildlife; sustaining forage and grazing plants; using plants to sequester greenhouse gases and increase soil organic matter; and using grazing lands as a source of biomass energy and raw materials for industrial products.

More information can be found at the [Grazing Lands Technology Institute](http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/glti/homepage.html).

(<http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/glti/homepage.html>)

Conservation Plant Material Centers

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The purpose of the program is to provide native plants that can help solve natural resource problems. Beneficial uses for which plant material may be developed include biomass production, carbon sequestration, erosion reduction, wetland restoration, water quality improvement, streambank and riparian area protection, coastal dune stabilization, and other special conservation treatment needs. Scientists at the [Plant Materials Centers](http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/) (<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/>) seek out plants that show promise for meeting an identified conservation need and test their performance. After species are proven, they are released to the private sector for commercial production. The work at the 26 centers is carried out cooperatively with state and Federal agencies, commercial businesses, and seed and nursery associations.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Contact: USDA, [Farm Service Agency](http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crpinfo.htm) (<http://www.fsa.usda.gov/dafp/cepd/crpinfo.htm>)

The Conservation Reserve Program reduces soil erosion, protects the Nation's ability to produce food and fiber, reduces sedimentation in streams and lakes, improves water quality, establishes wildlife habitat, and enhances forest and wetland resources. It encourages farmers to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover, such as tame or native grasses, wildlife plantings, trees, filterstrips, or riparian buffers. Farmers receive an annual rental payment for the term of the multi-year contract. Cost sharing is provided to establish the vegetative cover practices. For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html) page (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>).

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

Contact: USDA, *Natural Resources Conservation Service*

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program provides technical, educational, and financial assistance to eligible farmers and ranchers to address soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on their lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost-effective manner. The program provides assistance to farmers and ranchers in complying with Federal, State, and tribal environmental laws, and encourages environmental enhancement. The program is funded through the Commodity Credit Corporation. The purposes of the program are achieved through the implementation of a conservation plan which includes structural, vegetative, and land management practices on eligible land. Five- to ten-year contracts are made with eligible producers. Cost-share payments may be made to implement one or more eligible structural or vegetative practices, such as animal waste management facilities, terraces, filter strips, tree planting, and permanent wildlife habitat. Incentive payments can be made to implement one or more land management practices, such as nutrient management, pest management, and grazing land management.

Fifty percent of the funding available for the program will be targeted at natural resource concerns relating to livestock production. The program is carried-out primarily in priority areas that may be watersheds, regions, or multi-state areas, and for significant statewide natural resource concerns that are outside of geographic priority areas.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html) page

(<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>).

Rural Abandoned Mine Program (RAMP)

Contact: USDA, *Natural Resources Conservation Service*

RAMP is authorized by Section 406 of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) of 1977 as amended by the "Abandoned Mine Reclamation Act of 1991" as subtitled under the Budget Reconciliation Act (PL-101-508). It is authorized for the purpose of reclaiming the soil and water resources of rural lands adversely affected by past coal mining practices. There were approximately 1.1 million acres of abandoned coal-mined land needing reclamation in 1977. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), formally the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) administers the program, and funding is provided from money deposited in the Abandoned Mine Reclamation Fund. The program provides technical and financial assistance to land users who voluntarily enter into 5- to 10-year contracts for reclamation of up to 320 acres of eligible abandoned coal-mined lands and waters. The land user with NRCS technical assistance involved prepares a reclamation plan.

All active coal mining operators pay into the Abandoned Mine Reclamation fund at a rate of 35 cents per ton of coal produced from surface mining and 15 cents per ton of coal produced by underground mining. The fees are deposited in the interest-bearing fund, which is used to pay reclamation costs of AML projects. Expenditures from the fund are authorized through the regular congressional budgetary and appropriation's process.

Soil Survey Programs

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The [National Cooperative Soil Survey Program \(NCSS\)](http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/ncss/ncss.html) (<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/ncss/ncss.html>) is a partnership led by NRCS of Federal land management agencies, state agricultural experiment stations and state and local units of government that provide soil survey information necessary for understanding, managing, conserving and sustaining the nation's limited soil resources.

Soil surveys provide an orderly, on-the-ground, scientific inventory of soil resources that includes maps showing the locations and extent of soils, data about the physical and chemical properties of those soils, and information derived from that data about potentialities and problems of use on each kind of soil in sufficient detail to meet all reasonable needs for farmers, agricultural technicians, community planners, engineers, and scientists in planning and transferring the findings of research and experience to specific land areas. Soil surveys provide the [basic information](http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/nsdaf/) (<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/nsdaf/>) needed to manage soil sustainably. They also provide information needed to protect water quality, wetlands, and wildlife habitat. Soil surveys are the basis for predicting the behavior of a soil under alternative uses, its potential erosion hazard, potential for ground water contamination, suitability and productivity for cultivated crops, trees, and grasses. Soil surveys are important to planners, engineers, zoning commissions, tax commissioners, homeowners, developers, as well as agricultural producers. Soil surveys also provide a basis to help predict the effect of global climate change on worldwide agricultural production and other land-dependent processes. The [NRCS Soil Survey Division](http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/) (<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/>) through its [World Soil Resources Staff](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/WSR/) (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/WSR/>) helps gather and interpret soil information for global use.

NRCS provides the [soil surveys](http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/sslists/sslisthome.html) (<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/soildiv/sslists/sslisthome.html>) for the privately owned lands of the nation and, through its [National Soil Survey Center](http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/nssc/) (<http://www.statlab.iastate.edu/soils/nssc/>), provides scientific expertise to enable the NCSS to develop and maintain a uniform system for mapping and assessing soil resources so that soil information from different locations can be shared, regardless of which agency collects it. NRCS provides most of the training in soil survey to Federal agencies and assists other Federal agencies with their soil inventories on a reimbursable basis. NRCS is also responsible for developing the standards and mechanisms for providing [digital soil information](http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/soils_data.html) (http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/soils_data.html) for the national spatial data infrastructure required by Executive Order 12906.

Snow Survey and Water Supply Forecasts

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The purpose of the program is to provide western states and Alaska with information on future water supplies. NRCS field staff collect and analyze data on depth and water equivalent of the snowpack at more than 1,200 mountain sites and estimate annual water availability, spring runoff, and summer streamflows. Individuals, organizations, and state and Federal agencies use these forecasts for decisions relating to agricultural production, fish and

wildlife management, municipal and industrial water supply, urban development, flood control, recreation power generation, and water quality management. The National Weather Service includes the forecasts in their river forecasting function.

The objectives of the program are to:

- Provide water users with accurate forecasts of surface water supply within the first 5 working days of each month, Jan.-June.
- Efficiently obtain, manage, and disseminate high quality information on snow, water, climate, and hydrologic conditions.
- Develop and apply technology necessary to meet changing needs of water users.

The program was a GPRA pilot project for performance measurement.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Farmland Protection Program provides funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural uses. Working through existing programs, USDA joins with State, tribal, or local governments to acquire conservation easements or other interests from landowners. USDA provides up to 50 percent of the fair market easement value. To qualify, farmland must: be part of a pending offer from a State, tribe, or local farmland protection program; be privately owned; have a conservation plan; be large enough to sustain agricultural production; be accessible to markets for what the land produces; have adequate infrastructure and agricultural support services; and have surrounding parcels of land that can support long-term agricultural production. Depending on funding availability, proposals must be submitted by the government entities to the appropriate NRCS State Office during the application window.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](#) page

(<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>).

Flood Risk Reduction Program (FRR)

Contact: USDA, Farm Service Agency

The Flood Risk Reduction Program was established to allow farmers who voluntarily enter into contracts to receive payments on lands with high flood potential. In return, participants agree to forego certain USDA program benefits. These contract payments provide incentives to move farming operations from frequently flooded land.

Forestry Incentives Program (FIP)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Forestry Incentives Program (FIP) supports good forest management practices on privately owned, non-industrial forest lands nationwide. FIP is designed to benefit the environment while meeting future demands for wood products. Eligible practices are tree planting, timber stand improvement, site preparation for natural regeneration, and other related activities. FIP is available in counties designated by a Forest Service survey of eligible private timber acreage.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html) page (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>).

Watershed Surveys and Planning

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The [Watershed and Flood Prevention Act, P.L. 83-566, August 4, 1954, \(16 U.S.C. 1001-1008\)](http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/pl566/pl566.html), (<http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/pl566/pl566.html>) authorized this program. Prior to fiscal year 1996, small watershed planning activities and the cooperative river basin surveys and investigations authorized by Section 6 of the Act were operated as separate programs. The 1996 appropriations act combined the activities into a single program entitled the Watershed Surveys and Planning program. Activities under both programs are continuing under this authority. The purpose of the program is to assist Federal, State, and local agencies and tribal governments to protect watersheds from damage caused by erosion, floodwater, and sediment and to conserve and develop water and land resources. Resource concerns addressed by the program include water quality, opportunities for water conservation, wetland and water storage capacity, agricultural drought problems, rural development, municipal and industrial water needs, upstream flood damages, and water needs for fish, wildlife, and forest-based industries. Types of surveys and plans include watershed plans, river basin surveys and studies, flood hazard analyses, and flood plain management assistance. The focus of these plans is to identify solutions that use land treatment and nonstructural measures to solve resource problems.

Also see the [Emergency Watershed Protection Fact Sheet](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/ewpFs.html) (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/ewpFs.html>).

Resource Conservation & Development Program (RC&D)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The purpose of the [Resource Conservation and Development \(RC&D\)](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/RCCD/homepag3.htm) (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/RCCD/homepag3.htm>) program is to accelerate the conservation, development and utilization of natural resources, improve the general level of economic activity, and to enhance the environment and standard of living in authorized RC&D areas. It improves the capability of State, tribal and local units of government and local nonprofit organizations in rural areas to plan, develop and carry out programs for resource conservation and development. The program also establishes or improves coordination systems in rural areas. Current program objectives focus on improvement of quality of life achieved through natural resources conservation and community development which leads to sustainable communities, prudent use (development), and the management and conservation of natural resources. Authorized RC&D areas are locally sponsored areas designated by the Secretary of Agriculture for RC&D technical and financial assistance program funds. NRCS can provide grants for land conservation, water management, community development, and environmental needs in authorized RC&D areas.

Stewardship Incentives Program (SIP)

Contact: USDA, Forest Service

The Stewardship Incentive Program provides technical and financial assistance to encourage non-industrial private forest landowners to keep their lands and natural resources productive and healthy. Qualifying land includes rural lands with existing tree cover or land suitable for growing trees and which is owned by a private individual, group, association, corporation, Indian tribe, or other legal private entity. Eligible landowners must have an approved Forest Stewardship Plan and own 1,000 or fewer acres of qualifying land. Authorizations may be obtained for exceptions of up to 5,000 acres.

Watersheds Operations --Small Watershed Program and Flood Prevention Program (WF 08 or FP 03)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The Small [Watershed Program](http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/programs.html) (<http://www.ftw.nrcs.usda.gov/programs.html>) works through local government sponsors and helps participants solve natural resource and related economic problems on a watershed basis. Projects include watershed protection, flood prevention, erosion and sediment control, water supply, water quality, fish and wildlife habitat enhancement, wetlands creation and restoration, and public recreation in watersheds of 250,000 or fewer acres. Both technical and financial assistance are available.

Also see the [Emergency Watershed Protection Fact Sheet](http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/ewpFs.html) (<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/CCS/ewpFs.html>).

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The [Wetlands Reserve Program](http://www.wl.fb-net.org/) (<http://www.wl.fb-net.org/>) is a voluntary program to restore wetlands. Participating landowners can establish conservation easements of either permanent or 30-year duration, or can enter into restoration cost-share agreements where no easement is involved. In exchange for establishing a permanent easement, the landowner receives payment up to the agricultural value of the land and 100 percent of the restoration costs for restoring the wetlands. The 30-year easement payment is 75 percent of what would be provided for a permanent easement on the same site and 75 percent of the restoration cost. The voluntary agreements are for a minimum 10-year duration and provide for 75 percent of the cost of restoring the involved wetlands. Easements and restoration cost-share agreements establish wetland protection and restoration as the primary land use for the duration of the easement or agreement. In all instances, landowners continue to control access to their land.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](#) page.
(<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>)

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

Contact: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

The [Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program](http://wl.fb-net.org/whip/) (<http://wl.fb-net.org/whip/>) provides financial incentives to develop habitat for fish and wildlife on private lands. Participants agree to implement a wildlife habitat development plan and USDA agrees to provide cost-share assistance for the initial implementation of wildlife habitat development practices. USDA and program participants enter into a cost-share agreement for wildlife habitat development. This agreement generally lasts a minimum of 10 years from the date that the contract is signed.

For additional information, see our [Farm Bill](#) page.

(<http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/OPA/FB96OPA/FBillLnk.html>)

This information is based on the final rule for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) published in the Federal Register, September 19, 1997. The WHIP rule can be viewed on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.

FSA - Farm Service Agency

NRCS - Natural Resources Conservation Service

USDA - U.S. Department of Agriculture

WHIP - Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

Background

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is a voluntary program for people who want to develop and improve wildlife habitat primarily on private lands. It provides both technical assistance and cost-share payments to help establish and improve fish and wildlife habitat.

How WHIP Works

Participants who own or control land agree to prepare and implement a wildlife habitat development plan. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offers participants technical and financial assistance for the establishment of wildlife habitat development practices. In addition, if the landowner agrees, cooperating State wildlife agencies and nonprofit or private organizations may provide expertise or additional funding to help complete a project.

The Plan

NRCS helps participants prepare a wildlife habitat development plan in consultation with the local conservation district. The plan describes the landowner's goals for improving wildlife habitat, includes a list of practices and a schedule for installing them, and details the steps necessary to maintain the habitat for the life of the agreement. This plan may or may not be part

of a larger conservation plan that addresses other resource needs such as water quality and soil erosion.

Cost-Share Assistance

USDA and the participant enter into a cost-share agreement for wildlife habitat development. This agreement generally lasts from 5 to 10 years from the date the agreement is signed. Under the agreement:

- The landowner agrees to install and maintain the WHIP practices and allow NRCS or its agent access to monitor the effectiveness of the practices.
- USDA agrees to provide technical assistance and pay up to 75 percent of the cost of installing the wildlife habitat practices.

Cost-share payments may be used to establish new practices or replace practices that fail for reasons beyond the landowner's control.

Eligibility

Eligible participants include those who own or have control of the land under consideration. All lands are eligible for WHIP, except:

- Federal land;
- Land currently enrolled in the Water Bank Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program, or other similar programs;
- Land subject to an Emergency Watershed Protection Program floodplain easement; and
- Land where USDA determines that impacts from onsite or offsite conditions make the success of habitat improvement unlikely.

Mitigation

WHIP funds cannot be used for mitigation or on land designated as converted wetland.

WHIP Funding

WHIP is currently budgeted for \$50 million total through the year 2002. WHIP funds are distributed to States based on State wildlife habitat priorities, which may include wildlife habitat areas, targeted species and their habitats, and specific practices. WHIP may be implemented in cooperation with other Federal, State, or local agencies; conservation districts; or private conservation groups. State priorities are developed through a locally led process that identifies wildlife resource needs and finalized in consultation with the State Technical Committee.

For More Information

NRCS; Farm Service Agency; Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; or your local conservation district can provide more information. Your USDA Service Center is listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture. Information is also available on NRCS's World Wide Web site: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.

Wetlands Reserve Program Fact Sheet

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a *voluntary* program to restore and protect wetlands on private property. It is an opportunity for landowners to receive financial incentives to enhance wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land.

How Does WRP Benefit You?

You will:

- Receive financial compensation;
- Enhance wetland values that benefit you and society;
- Reduce problems associated with farming potentially difficult areas;
- Practice conservation stewardship; and
- Provide recreational opportunities.

Wetland Functions and Values

- Providing fish and wildlife habitat;
- Improving water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals;
- Reducing flooding;
- Recharging groundwater;
- Protecting biological diversity; and
- Furnishing educational, scientific, recreational, and esthetic benefits.

Background

Congress authorized WRP under the Food Security Act of 1985, as amended by the 1990 and 1996 Farm Bills. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) administers the program in consultation with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other Federal agencies. Funding for WRP comes from the Commodity Credit Corporation.

Sign-up

States were authorized to begin a continuous sign-up as of October 1, 1996. Check with your local USDA Service Center or conservation district office for the sign-up schedule in your State.

How the Program Works

Landowners who choose to participate in WRP may sell a conservation easement or enter into a cost-share restoration agreement with USDA to restore and protect wetlands. The landowner voluntarily limits future use of the land, yet retains private ownership. The landowner and NRCS develop a plan for the restoration and maintenance of the wetland. The program offers landowners three options: permanent easements, 30-year easements, and

restoration cost-share agreements of a minimum 10-year duration.

Permanent Easement. This is a conservation easement in perpetuity. Easement payment will be the lesser of: the agricultural value of the land, an established payment cap, or an amount offered by the landowner. In addition to paying for the easement, USDA pays 100 percent of the costs of restoring the wetland.

30-Year Easement. This is a conservation easement lasting 30 years. Easement payments are 75 percent of what would be paid for a permanent easement. USDA also pays 75 percent of restoration costs.

Restoration Cost-Share Agreement. This is an agreement (generally for a minimum of 10 years in duration) to re-establish degraded or lost wetland habitat. USDA pays 75 percent of the cost of the restoration activity. This does not place an easement on the property. The landowner provides the restoration site without reimbursement.

Other agencies and private conservation organizations may provide additional assistance for easement payment and wetland restoration costs as a way to reduce the landowner's share of the costs. Such special partnership efforts are encouraged.

Eligibility

Landowner. To offer a conservation easement, the landowner must have owned the land for at least 1 year prior to enrolling the land in the program unless the land was inherited or the landowner can prove the land was not obtained for the purpose of enrolling it in the program. To participate in a restoration cost-share agreement, the landowner must show evidence of ownership.

Land. To be eligible for WRP, land must be restorable and be suitable for wildlife benefits. This includes:

- Wetlands farmed under natural conditions;
- Farmed wetlands;
- Prior converted cropland;
- Farmed wetland pasture;
- Farmland that has become a wetland as a result of flooding;
- Rangeland, pasture, or production forestland where the hydrology has been significantly degraded and can be restored;
- Riparian areas which link protected wetlands;
- Lands adjacent to protected wetlands that contribute significantly to wetland functions and values; and
- Previously restored wetlands (Conservation Reserve Program [CRP] land is eligible if it meets WRP requirements).

Ineligible Land. Ineligible land includes wetlands converted after December 23, 1985;

lands with timber stands established under a CRP contract; Federal lands; and lands where conditions make restoration impossible.

Uses of WRP Land

A landowner continues to control access to the land--and may lease the land--for hunting, fishing, and other undeveloped recreational activities. At any time, a landowner may request that additional activities be evaluated to determine if they are compatible uses for the site. This request may include such items as permission to cut hay, graze livestock or harvest wood products. Compatible uses are allowed if they are fully consistent with the protection and enhancement of the wetland.

Cooperating Agencies

Additional information on WRP is available from USDA Service Centers, State Cooperative Extension offices, and local conservation districts.

The following provides background and current information on USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program. It is based on a paper presented at the Soil and Water Conservation Society annual meeting in July 1998 in San Diego, California.

Tools for Watershed and Landscape Management Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

A New Approach and Tool to Conservation and Environmental Protection for America's Farmers and Ranchers

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- The purpose of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is to maximize environmental benefits per Federal dollar expended on private lands. The program provides financial incentives and technical and educational assistance. It assists farmers and ranchers (1) in mitigating or resolving soil, water, and related natural resource problems and (2) in complying with environmental laws. Congress authorized EQIP in the 1996 Farm Bill.
- EQIP works primarily in priority areas identified by local communities and where significant natural resource concerns exist. These priority areas are identified in a locally led conservation process through work groups that gather community input to ensure that the program reflects local needs and priorities.
- Congress authorized \$200 million annually for fiscal years 1997-2002. Fifty percent of the funding must be targeted to solve natural resource concerns relating to livestock production.
- EQIP uses a new approach and is an important conservation tool for community-based watershed and landscape management.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the lead agency responsible for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), has invested considerable effort in developing this new conservation program. Nearly three years have passed since the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (the 1996 Farm Bill) was signed into law, creating the program. Both Congress and the Administration had similar visions for this new conservation program. In the Administration's Farm Bill Guidance, commonly referred to as the "Blue Book," the need to offer farmers more decision-making opportunities and greater flexibility in how they farm their land was identified, advocating shifting more authority to local and State officials and targeting conservation programs. There were also recommendations to simplify conservation and environmental program requirements and better incorporate State and local priorities. Congress, for the most part, adopted legislation very consistent with these principles and incorporated them in the EQIP provisions of the 1996 Farm Bill.

EQIP is the largest of the new conservation programs and incorporates a multi-faceted systems approach to conservation and protection of natural resources. It replaces many of the previous cost-share programs and yet is very different. Major changes from prior programs include: targeted assistance, locally led conservation, consideration of all resource concerns, leveraging of funds, meeting environmental laws, three-pronged assistance approach, required conservation plan, and offer evaluation. EQIP builds on successful aspects of previous programs and uses these as a foundation to promote a new focus in resource conservation. A brief

explanation of these changes is as follows.

Targeted Assistance

EQIP targets assistance from the beginning by prioritizing where funding should be concentrated. Last March, the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS) convened a roundtable representing a broad array of perspectives on agricultural resource conservation. A "White Paper Report," published by SWCS, summarized the roundtable. The white paper stated that a central change to conservation programs in the 1996 Farm Bill is that the basis for allocating conservation funds is shifting from a pattern of equity, which provides similar levels of support in most places regardless of the need, to efficiency and concentrates a larger portion of financial resources on the most severe problems. The use of priority areas, within the watershed approach concept, will lead to conservation efforts being more efficiently applied. This finding is not new. A study published 61 years ago by the Brookings Institution regarding the soil conservation provisions of the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 found that these provisions were formulated to allow virtually all areas and all farmers to share in them, regardless of the fact that the need for and advantages to be derived from soil conservation varied greatly. The provisions seemed on the whole to take on more definitely the character of financial aid for everybody than specific implementation of a planned system of efficient farming (Nourse, et al., 1936).

Locally Led Conservation

The foundation of EQIP targeting is the locally led conservation process. Local work groups, headed by the conservation district, identify the most significant resource concerns in a designated geographic area in a process driven from the field and State levels. Locally led conservation is not new, but strengthened through EQIP in its need for active local leadership in natural resource management. This need for locally led conservation was one of the most important factors leading to the establishment of conservation districts nearly 60 years ago. Following the creation of the Soil Conservation Service, conservation districts were created as a local focal point for coordination and delivering technical assistance and funding to private land managers. The enactment of the 1996 Farm Bill signaled a re-emphasis of the original district approach of locally led conservation. Elected officials and policy makers have reaffirmed that local leadership and grassroots decision-making are the keys to successfully managing and protecting our natural resources. As a result, conservation districts now have additional opportunities to return to their roots and lead their communities in determining local conservation needs and priorities.

Consideration of all Resource Concerns

EQIP covers resource concerns on a localized level and strives to treat the highest priority natural resource problems in a prescribed time. Soil, water, and related natural resources, including grazing lands, forest lands, wetlands, and wildlife habitat, are given equal initial consideration under the program. Equal initial consideration for treatment does not mean equal dollars are allocated to each resource. The specific natural resources that are addressed at the local, State, Tribal, and national levels are determined through the process to designate priority areas.

Leveraging of Funds

EQIP is one of several conservation programs making up tools in a conservation "toolbox" of programs that farmers and ranchers can use to solve natural resource concerns. Leveraging opportunities with other conservation programs and efforts available in the area will help accomplish expected goals and objectives. Financial contributions from other agencies, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector will assist the program achieve even greater results. These financial contributions could include technical assistance and educational assistance contributions, especially in-kind assistance, from State, local, and private sources. Numerous entities could play an integral role in helping achieve even greater benefits by leveraging some of their environmental efforts with those that are developed through the locally led process.

Meeting Environmental Laws

EQIP can also help farmers and ranchers comply with Federal, State, and Tribal environmental laws. By statutory authority EQIP can be used to comply with nonpoint source pollution requirements under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act (33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.) and other Federal and state environmental laws.

Three-Pronged Assistance Approach

The 1996 Farm Bill established the EQIP program to provide cost-share and incentive payments, technical assistance, and education to farmers and ranchers. This three-pronged approach of financial-technical-education assistance has proven to be effective in helping landowners achieve long-term conservation and environmental benefits. Technical and education assistance have tremendous value. They are needed by many producers, either alone or in combination with financial assistance. Technical and financial assistance may entice farmers to experiment with conservation practices; however, the practice must fulfill some need of the producer or the practice will be rejected. Educational assistance helps identify and support this need by demonstrating the best farming practices that will assure profitable production, while helping producers recognize natural resource problems in their current farming regime. Once provided the educational and technical assistance to improve production capabilities and natural resource conditions, some producers can solve their problems without additional financial incentives because they may have the needed funds and knowledge to adjust farming practices to solve the problems.

Required Conservation Plan

EQIP helps local communities identify priority areas that are natural-resource based, not geo-political based, with achievable goals in a reasonable amount of time (3-5 years). The program is designed to encourage farmers and ranchers to look at their total operation, while considering impacts beyond farm boundaries, and to resolve all identified resource conservation and environmental problems within a prescribed time. All EQIP activities must be carried out according to a conservation plan. These plans are site-specific for each farm or ranch and can be developed by producers with help from NRCS or other service providers. Producer conservation plans should address the primary natural resource concerns. All plans are subject to NRCS technical standards adapted for local conditions and are approved by the conservation district. Producers are not obligated, but are encouraged, to develop comprehensive or total resource

management plans.

Offer Evaluation

An objective offer evaluation is computed for each applicant to calculate environmental benefits expected from use of EQIP funds. Referred to as the "offer index" farmers with more acceptable index values -- those doing the most to resolve the most problems for the least program funds -- are more likely to get the limited EQIP funds. Providing additional environmental benefits without increasing the costs may improve the offer index.

Funding

Funding for EQIP is allocated based on proposals submitted to the State conservationist, based on the advice of the State technical committee. The State technical committee is comprised of a team of conservation representatives at the State level. The State technical committee reviews the proposals. The State conservationist, with the State technical committee's input, then selects proposals for funding. The selected proposals are called priority areas and are primarily natural resource-based (most are watershed-based). In fiscal years 1997 and 1998, at least 65 percent of the State's total fund allocation are towards these areas, while the other 35 percent of the funds address statewide natural resource concerns.

The 1996 Farm Bill authorized the availability of \$200 million from the Commodity Credit Corporation each fiscal year through 2002. That has been the spending level for 1997 and 1998. Nationally, half of the funding is targeted to livestock-related natural resource concerns, and the remainder to other significant conservation priorities associated with agricultural production. As evidenced by the high demand for the program in 1998, and the more than 57,000 applications for assistance requesting over \$552 million in 1997, the funding level for the EQIP program is insufficient to meet the demand. To help meet this demand, and to help meet the conservation needs as identified in the Administration's Clean Water Action Plan and the USDA Civil Rights Action Team Report, the President included a \$100 million increase in the 1999 budget. This amount, however, was not included in the final agriculture appropriations for fiscal year 1999.

Program Development

Before and during the development of the 1996 Farm Bill, farmers and ranchers nationwide informed their legislators and NRCS, letting them know that the old top-down way in which the Government has traditionally operated in the conservation arena would not work in this day and age. More flexibility, more local input into the decision-making process, and more program diversity would promote the adoption of conservation at the farm and ranch level. Prior to EQIP, one cost-share program was primarily expected to meet the diverse conservation needs of all producers nationwide. A farmer had to make his or her operation fit the program, however awkward that fit may have been. The new conservation provisions reflect the feedback from those making their living from the land in agricultural production. The old cost-share programs are gone, the focus now rests on adaptive management that is flexible, locally driven, diverse, and voluntary. The cornerstone of this new way of doing business is the conservation plan.

Conservation planning is nothing new. NRCS, as a technical agency, has been providing conservation planning since its inception, usually outside the realm of a specific program and under the auspices of technical assistance. The purpose of the plan is to provide a means to correct resource problems that are present within the objectives of the farmer or rancher.

Producers requested a voice in identifying the natural resource concerns in their area and wanted a new program that incorporated a more integrated method of resource management. The interconnectedness of the resource base demands a more comprehensive planning system. Hence, NRCS encourages and allows all resource concerns to be addressed with a comprehensive, system-type approach through EQIP rather than through an individual practice that addresses only part of the problem. A comprehensive approach encourages farmers and ranchers to consider all effects of their actions on their own units, as well as the impacts beyond their farms and ranches. Tangible benefits beyond the farm level can be achieved. This approach also allows producers greater flexibility in meeting their objectives.

EQIP is more than a single purpose cost-share program. Resolving the complex environmental problems of today is more difficult than the soil erosion control emphasis decades ago.

Therefore, the technical assistance provided requires a higher level of skills and expertise than in the past. Even when regulations provide the impetus for adopting alternative management practices, technical assistance, and to a great extent educational assistance, are needed to ensure that the new practices are used properly. The ability to provide effective conservation measures, as well as adequate levels of technical assistance to locally led conservation efforts, represent the linchpin of the program.

Program Implementation

In 1997, local work groups submitted recommendations for priority areas to the NRCS State conservationist, who with the advice of the State technical committee, set priorities for the program, including the approval of priority areas. Over 600 priority areas were approved by State conservationists. When fund allocations were made to the States, it resulted in 476 priority areas being funded.

There has been a significant response to this program by farmers and ranchers. As stated previously, NRCS received more than 57,000 applications in 1997. It would require over \$552 million to fully fund all applications received last year alone, which is three times the funds available for financial assistance. After NRCS ranked the applications based on criteria developed at the local and State levels, Farm Service Agency (FSA) county committees approved over 24,000 long-term contracts with farmers and ranchers. About 70 of the program funds were expended in priority areas and 54 percent were expended on livestock-related concerns.

Local work groups recommended nearly 1,300 priority areas to State conservationists for approval in 1998. Over 650 priority areas were approved by State conservationists. These proposals again far exceed the available funds for 1998. The number and quality of these priority areas indicate that many more local work groups were involved in the process in FY 1998.

Lessons Learned

First, when evaluating the response from the farmers and ranchers across the country, NRCS learned that there is a tremendous need for a comprehensive natural resource conservation program. Even with the new program requirements for a conservation plan and a 5- to 10-year contract, the demand is high and will likely become higher as more producers become aware of the program. One reason for the popularity is the important role that local interests have in identifying where the program should be delivered. Through the locally led conservation efforts, a strong interest in the program has already developed.

Second, while there is a considerable amount of interest in the program, increased efforts to

inform and reach out to producers is needed. Many producers, especially low-income and minority farmers, have not traditionally participated in the previous conservation programs that were replaced by EQIP. Reaching out to these producers, as well as to all producers, will help them better understand and improve the natural resource conditions on their farms and ranches, and in their communities.

The first phase of NRCS's National EQIP Evaluation has been completed and the final report published. The results reflect the combined findings from 12 States and 35 counties. The purpose of the evaluation was to review program startup activities, to identify potential problems and inconsistencies, and to identify effective implementation strategies. Three of the major objectives included the effectiveness of funding proposals, the application ranking criteria, and the application offer process to maximize environmental benefits per dollar expended. The results of this evaluation showed that the 1997, and especially the 1998, proposals for EQIP funding were developed with significant involvement of within-county local work groups. Attendance and broad agency representation in the local work groups were excellent in most offices visited. Moreover, several States did an excellent job in leveraging EQIP funds with other State/local funding sources to enhance targeting of locally important natural resource concerns. Finally, Phase II of the NRCS's National EQIP Evaluation is currently underway. This effort includes a review of the program's implementation activities, including its effectiveness to maximize environmental benefits on the landscape and to determine if desired outcomes defined through the Statute and program procedure are being achieved.

Outlook

The shift to the new approach is taking hold throughout the Nation. The transition to this new approach has transcended some elements of doubt regarding the ability to base funding decisions on objective rational and not on geo-political expectation or on historical funding outlays. The ability to efficiently target limited program funds to maximize environmental benefits per dollar expended is contingent on the use of science-based information to substantiate the overall need for funding. The natural resources assessment process used by local work groups through locally led conservation, for the most part, uses science-based studies and other technical data sources to identify the primary resource concerns. The assessment process is in itself in a stage of transition as the identity, availability, and acceptability of these studies and data sources are increasing. These data also provide a means to establish defined and objective ranking factors and performance indicators for individual applicants, once a priority area is approved.

As a result, EQIP funding decisions truly are considering a variety of factors, such as maximizing environmental benefits per dollar expended, providing assistance in watersheds, regions, or areas where State, Tribal or local governments have provided or will provide assistance to producers for similar purposes (leveraging) so that the most significant environmental and natural resource concerns are effectively addressed.

Despite early success of the program, improvements are still being made. The entire EQIP process, from application processes to payment procedures, is constantly being reviewed to enhance the flexibility, accountability, performance measurement, and efficiency of the program. For example, responding to the time it takes to evaluate all applications, an application screening process has been developed. Originating in a few States, it will be offered nationwide to allow program managers to evaluate the merits of applications in a more streamlined but technically credible manner.

The outlook for EQIP, and more importantly locally led conservation, is very promising. To achieve success in conservation on private lands, there remains a need for a continuing commitment to locally led conservation, to partnerships, and to basing policy decisions on good science and accountability. EQIP is one of the tools to help meet the goals of both the land and the landowner. EQIP implementation is benefited by the strengths of the locally led conservation approach to conservation.

NRCS, conservation districts, FSA employees, and others have done an impressive job to get EQIP on the ground quickly, efficiently, and with a strong adherence to the vision of the program. Making the transition to new programs is never without difficulty. With refinements to the program, taking advantage of its flexibility, and more program experience by producers and employees, EQIP will have even greater successes in the future.

Conclusion

Improving and protecting private land is important to everyone. However, our lands have been telling us for many years that things must be done differently in order to treat all of our natural resource problems. The locally led conservation initiative emphasized by EQIP is a reaffirmation to listen to the land where it is best heard, on the local level. The locally led conservation effort strives to get our Nation's farmers and ranchers to consider everything within their farm boundaries and beyond. Locally led conservation is meant to be program neutral and encourages local residents to work together and take responsibility for solving environmental problems. Locally led conservation is an effort to diagnose and prioritize problems, support local initiative and involvement, develop comprehensive plans of treatment, identify sources of help, and provide the best financial, educational, and technical assistance available for solutions. The EQIP program is currently operating by allowing local work groups to set their own priorities based on community needs and conservation benefits expected. This program, and others in the conservation "toolbox" are helping farmers and ranchers throughout the country address some of their most pressing natural resource concerns -- including soil erosion, water quality and quantity, wildlife habitat, air quality, and grazing lands. It took well over six decades to bring about fundamental change, built on successful components of previous conservation programs. EQIP is part of a renewed effort to, by the end of the century, achieve healthier lands, cleaner water, and better wildlife habitat on private lands that will benefit all Americans for generations to come.

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